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ABSTRACT

This Digest discusses approaches to group learning in the language classroom, presenting some principles that are common to any group learning approach, whether it be cooperative learning, student team learning, group investigation, or collaborative learning. The Digest also discusses the Collaborative Learning Model (Reid et al., 1989) which pinpoints five phases for designing instruction for collaborative learning: engagement, exploration, transformation, presentation, and reflection. The Digest argues that collaborative learning in the classroom should prepare learners for the kind of team work and critical interchange that they will need to be effective participants in their communities and workplaces. (NKA)

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Enhancing Student Thinking Through Collaborative Learning

by Karen Yeok-Hwa Ngeow

Major approaches that relate to group work in the language classroom are known by different labels: cooperative learning (Johnson & Johnson, 1992), student team learning (Slavin, 1996), group investigation (Sharan & Sharan, 1992), and collaborative learning (Barnes et al., 1986). While each of these approaches may differ in certain aspects of learning and instructional design, such as group structure and teacher role, there are certain attributes that are considered common to all group learning approaches (Stahl, 1994).

Critical attributes of group learning

There are some principles that are common to any group learning approach:

1. a group-learning task is designed based on shared learning goals and outcomes;
2. small-group learning takes place in groups of between 3-5 students;
3. cooperative behavior involves trust-building activities, joint planning, and an understanding of team support conduct;
4. positive interdependence is developed through setting mutual goals; and
5. individual accountability, role fulfillment, and task commitment are expected of students.

There are also some practices in group learning that may vary among group-learning approaches. These include:

1. grouping procedures (e.g., forming homogenous or heterogeneous groups in terms of skills/levels/interests, role assignment, short or long term group assignment);
2. development of group work skills (e.g., explicit teaching, small group team-building exercises, or promotion of reflection on group dynamics);
3. setting up of interdependence structures (e.g., goal achievement and incentives, resources, division of tasks);
4. evaluation procedures (e.g., individual, peer, or group grading, peer evaluation or self-reflection);
5. definition of the teacher's role, which is complex and may differ in various phases of the group learning activity. For example, the teacher can be supervisory, evaluative, or supportive in maintaining cooperative norms at different stages of student learning.

The list above provides guidelines for planning collaborative learning instruction. What is often overlooked, however, is a consideration of the rationale for students working together in groups in the first place. Duffy and Cunningham (1996) lament that supporters of collaborative learning have previously concentrated only on instructional design issues that deal with structural and management factors such as strategies that ensure fair participatory opportunities. They encourage using group learning to promote dialogical interchange and reflexivity among learners (p.186). This involves having learners share alternative viewpoints, support each other's inquiry processes, and develop critical thinking skills that include the ability to reflect and improve on their own learning.

Instructional Phases of Collaborative Learning

In the Collaborative Learning Model described by Reid et al. (1989), there are five phases for designing instruction for collaborative learning: engagement, exploration, transformation, presentation, and reflection.

In the *engagement* phase, the teacher sets the stage by providing the class with a collaborative activity. It is important that this task be designed in such a way that it not only provides the basis for ensuing necessary group activities, but also brings home a sense of ownership to its learners. An example of an authentic collaborative activity for a reading classroom is one where students examine the type of persuasive language found in authentic sales literature such as brochures, advertisements, and labels. They can then analyze the kinds of strategies advertisers use to influence potential buyers.

In the *exploration* phase, students work on the initial exploration of ideas and information. Teachers have to decide how much input should be given for the learning task, and how much should be left to the resourcefulness of the students. To encourage group interdependence at this stage, teachers can ask students in teams to demonstrate their learning using

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different response modes. K-W-H-L-S is one of many strategies that can be used with students of all ages and levels to help insure that every student pursues goals that are individually beneficial and yet congruent with the group's common goal in the learning activity. The basic components of the K-W-H-L-S strategy are:

K: What I know (e.g., information on what I already know about advertisements)
W: What I want to learn (e.g., information on advertising strategies)
H: How I will learn it and work with others to attain mutual goals (e.g., bring in information, share ideas and compare perspectives)
L: What I learned (e.g., evaluating what I have found out and how I can use this information)
S: How I shared, or will share what I have learned from others (e.g., writing up a joint report or opinion piece for publication in a magazine)

The third phase has to do with the *transformation* of knowledge. This is where students in their learning groups engage in activities to "reshape" the information by organizing, clarifying, elaborating, or synthesizing learning concepts. It is crucial for this stage of learning that tasks require discussion and contribution from all group members. It is too easy to let a situation turn into one where the most vocal or linguistically proficient member of the group takes over the tasks of clarifying and elaborating on learning concepts, and not have other group members benefit from the collaborative activity. The learning activity designed should therefore be complex enough that there can be many opportunities for knowledge transformation at different levels or in various sub-tasks, thereby involving as many group members as possible. For instance, students take turns categorizing information, looking for examples to support their opinions, and discussing the implications of an advertising strategy on their own and their families' purchasing behaviors.

In the *presentation* phase, student groups have the opportunity to present their findings to an interested and critical audience. It is possible to structure the main activity in a way that would entail having different student groups contribute their findings to make up a bigger learning outcome (e.g., different sections of a proposal). A significant consideration at this stage is to ensure that the audience for the presentation is authentic and can provide responsive feedback to the information generated by the groups' efforts. This can be done with critical peer groups or with expert groups that have a genuine interest in the findings of the presentation. In the above example, the reading group that reviews sales literature and analyzes advertising strategies can now write an article for a consumer awareness magazine on what they have collaboratively learned about the influence of advertising on public buying.

The last phase of the group learning activity is *reflection*. Here, students analyze what they have learned, identify strengths and weaknesses in the learning processes they went through, and offer constructive ideas on how their learning can be improved. Student reflection should be done both individually and collaboratively, and they need to analyze individual as well as group learning processes. For that purpose, teachers may construct individual and group guidelines. Some questions for reflection are:

- To prepare for this activity, I ...
- I think I contributed to the group's work quality by ...
- Something that would help us work better next time is ...
- One thing that was not useful to our group work was ...
- Some ways in which the thinking of the group could have been better are ...

Dewey (1938) said that one of the philosophies of education is not to learn merely to acquire information but rather to bring that learning to bear upon our everyday actions and behaviors. Consistent with this goal, we would argue that collaborative learning in the classroom should prepare learners for the kind of team work and critical interchange that they will need to be effective participants in their communities and workplaces in the future.

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